

Defining Our Programs, Refining Our Vision

For the first time in about 20 years, Agricultural Research Service managers have completely reorganized the agency's national research program. Now ARS is better equipped to solve the increasingly complex problems facing agriculture.

In 1995, ARS leaders held a series of regional visioning conferences with our customers, stakeholders, and partners. Participants included crop and livestock producers, agribusinesses, ARS and university researchers, extension agents, and resource managers.

These conferences confirmed that ARS was doing valuable work. But they also revealed that we needed a formal process that allowed customers and scientists to help develop our research priorities, evaluate our progress, and capitalize on our uniquely diverse pool of expertise, resources, and geographic presence. They also showed that we needed to improve coordination of our research across this diversity.

At the same time as the visioning conferences, ARS was responding to the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act. The GPRA required federal agencies to prepare 5-year strategic plans and annual reports on progress in achieving the goals stated in the plans.

As a result, we have organized more than 1,100 individual ARS research projects into three broad categories encompassing 23 research programs. The categories are:

- Animal Production, Product Value, and Safety;
- Natural Resources and Sustainable Agricultural Systems;
- Crop Production, Product Value, and Safety.

Projects featured in *Agricultural Research* magazine now include information to identify the research program and category to which they belong.

For instance, in this issue, scientists discovering clues to bluetongue transmission seek to improve the health of livestock animals and increase trade opportunities for producers [p. 4]. Another article highlights the benefits of remote sensing in isolating environmental problems [p. 8]. And researchers developing new fruit tree rootstock and fruit varieties fulfill the mission of improving crop production and value for peach, pear, and plum producers [p. 16].

In some ways, differences between the "old" and "new" ARS programs are subtle. ARS research has long provided agriculture with tools to produce healthier livestock and better crops while preserving natural resources. But the new system better integrates the research programs by using multidisciplinary teams to manage them. This more holistic approach to problem-solving emphasizes functional relations between ARS programs. Take, for example, the Manure and Byproduct Utilization National Program, which is part of the Natural Resources and Sustainable Agricultural Systems category.

This program aims to develop agonomic practices that effectively use manure and other byproducts while protecting the environment and public and animal health. Its management team includes experts in soil biology, animal nutrition, environmental quality (air, soil, and water), food safety, and animal production. Besides offering the program a wide range of expertise, team members report relevant findings to colleagues who are part of other ARS national research programs—for example, Food Safety or Water Quality and Management.

National planning workshops are being held to define the scope and objectives of each national program. Many have already been held around the country, and more will take place over the next year. Participants learn about ARS activities and program structure. They also help ARS identify high-priority research needs. Schedules for the workshops are

posted on the World Wide Web at <http://www.nps.ars.usda.gov/calnps.cfm>.

An important component of the new ARS National Program System will be a new form of peer review. In addition to our long-standing internal reviews, each project will be evaluated for quality by panels made up mostly of scientific experts outside ARS. While ARS research program topics are selected, in part, based on Congressional and USDA priorities, this peer review will provide an additional, objective platform to ensure that ARS devotes its resources to only the highest quality research.

The new system will also facilitate change. Each national program will be reviewed on a 5-year cycle. If the problem addressed by a program is solved or is no longer a high priority after 5 years, it can be replaced by new, more timely programs.

But the greatest benefit of the revised project management system may be the increased accessibility of information about the research programs. Descriptions and team members are available on the web at <http://www.nps.ars.usda.gov>. Anyone with an interest in a particular issue—such as methyl bromide alternatives, food safety, or global change—can easily review ARS research on that topic. Hard copies of the information are also available.

Annual status reports on each research program will be provided at the ARS web site and in paper form. Customers can easily see what has been accomplished and comment on how the program can be improved.

Relevance, quality, and impact: These are the goals of ARS research and the newly revised project management system that guides it. We look forward to working with all of ARS' employees, customers, stakeholders, and partners to achieve these goals.

K. Darwin Murrell
Deputy Administrator
Agricultural Research Service